

# Lymphedema

# Effects of Cancer and Treatment: Lymphedema

## What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema (lymph = a colourless fluid; edema = swelling) is swelling in a part of your body that can occur if your lymphatic system is not working properly. The lymphatic system plays an important role moving lymphatic fluid throughout your body and in fighting infection.

If lymph nodes or lymphatic vessels are removed or damaged, lymphatic fluid is not properly moved and a build up may occur. This buildup of fluid is called lymphedema. Lymphedema can occur immediately after surgery but it also can occur a few to several years after surgery or radiation treatment.

## Who is at risk for lymphedema?

Patients who have lymph nodes removed during surgery or who have radiation treatment which includes the lymph nodes, or both treatments, can be at risk for lymphedema in the affected area. The presence of cancer in lymph nodes can also cause lymphedema.

## How do I know if I have lymphedema?

You or your doctor may be the first to discover your lymphedema. If you have lymphedema you may:

- Notice that your limb is bigger.
- Feel heaviness or a full feeling in that part of your body.
- Feel your skin is too tight in that part of your body.
- Notice a decrease in movement in that part of your body.
- Find your clothing, rings or watch feel too tight.

**Let your doctor know if you find you are experiencing any of the above.**

**What are your questions? Please ask.  
We are here to help you.**

## **How is lymphedema managed?**

While there is no cure for lymphedema, there are effective ways to help manage the swelling.

You may be referred to a specially trained therapist who will assess your edema and offer you treatment options. They will provide you with information regarding the lymphatic system and treatment options for lymphedema.

You may be encouraged to be more physically active. Exercise such as swimming and walking are often recommended. Skin care to prevent infection is often recommended.

You may need a compression sleeve or stocking or vest (bandaging or specialized garments) to be worn in order to support your tissue.

Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) may be recommended, which includes:

- Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) massage to help get the lymphatic fluid moving
- Compression Therapy to gradually reduce the swelling and maintain the reduction
- Therapeutic Exercise to help pump out the swelling

Occasionally, a special inflatable pump may be used to help reduce the swelling.

## **How can I help manage lymphedema and reduce the risk of complications?**

You can do many things to manage your lymphedema and reduce the risk of complications (eg. infection). They are:

- Do the therapeutic daily exercise or self-massage that you have learned.
- Wear properly fitted compression wraps or garments.
- Eat healthy meals.
- Maintain an ideal weight.
- Engage in regular physical activities.
- Do not wear tight-fitting clothing and jewelry on the at risk area, it may result in reducing blood flow.
- Protect swollen areas from extreme heat (including saunas and hot tubs).
- Protect your skin from the sun, insect and pet bites/scratches.
- Use only an electric razor.
- Use extra care not to damage your cuticles when cutting and filing your nails.

- To reduce the risk of lymphedema when taking an airplane flight, you may want to wear a temporary tubular elastic support bandage (e.g. TUBIGRIP) on the body part at risk of lymphedema.
- If you have lymphedema and are taking an airplane flight, you should wear a properly fitted compression garment.
- Take extra care with minor cuts and burns by applying an antibiotic cream, and if more serious, see your doctor.
- Whenever possible, do not allow injections, blood pressure readings, acupuncture, an intravenous to be started, or blood taken from your affected arm or leg.
- Wear gloves when using chemical cleaners and when gardening.
- Try to avoid carrying a heavy bag or purse on your at risk side.
- Use a thimble when sewing.

**Call your doctor immediately if you notice any signs of infection such as redness or heat in a swollen part of your body.**

### **Questions to ask your health care team**

- Am I likely to develop lymphedema?
- Were lymph nodes removed during my surgery?
- Are there lymph nodes in the area of my radiation treatment?
- What exercises can I do to reduce lymphedema?
- Who can teach me simple exercises to help reduce the symptoms of lymphedema?
- Do I need a referral to see a lymphedema therapist?
- Are there any medications or natural treatments to help reduce symptoms?
- Will the symptoms of lymphedema go away without treatment?

## **Looking for more information on this topic?**

You can contact the Canadian Cancer Society at [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca) or call the Cancer Information Service of the Cancer Society at 1-888-939-3333. You can also contact your local public library for books, videos, magazine articles and online health information. For a list of public libraries in Nova Scotia go to

**<http://publiclibraries.ns.ca>.**

For more information visit the Nova Scotia Cancer Care Program website **[www.nscancercare.ca](http://www.nscancercare.ca)**.

More information is also available at **[www.atlanticlymph.ca](http://www.atlanticlymph.ca)**.



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For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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